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ABSTRACT

Five universities in New York State (SUNY--State University of New York at Stony Brook, Syracuse, Cornell, Binghamton, and New York Universities--are involved in a 3-year project to better prepare graduate students to become teachers. The State University of New York, Stony Brook, English Department is providing graduate teaching assistants with intensive faculty mentoring. Though much time and energy have gone into providing these students with critical feedback about their efforts to become scholars and researchers, too little time is spent providing "criticism" toward their efforts to become good teachers. Ways must be found to provide this feedback and to comment critically on pedagogy. Teaching in close collaboration with colleagues, using largely the same materials and assignments, and meeting regularly, especially to discuss student writing, may help achieve this goal. (CR)

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4 C's Presentation
March 28, 1996
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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Pedagogy and Intellectual Work

Introductory Note:

The context for this presentation is SUNY at Stony Brook's participation in the Preparing Future Professors Project, supported by a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE). Syracuse University is administering the grant. Five universities in New York State are involved: in addition to Syracuse and Stony Brook, New York University, Binghamton University, and Cornell University. The purpose of the project is to prepare graduate students better for the transition to being college and university faculty. The project will run for three years, focusing each year on a different discipline. The first year, academic year '94-'95, focused on Political Science, last year on Rhetoric and Composition, and in the '96-'97 year the focus will be on Mathematics. I directed the English Department's participating during the Rhetoric and Composition year. My remarks concern a major emphasis within the larger purpose of the project, namely preparing our graduate students better as teachers.

State of the Project

This year we're providing our graduate Teaching Assistants with more intensive faculty mentoring than we have in the past. I believe our year is going well, but to keep my remarks brief, I'm going to emphasize a disquieting

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realization I've had, and that is how much of our time and energy as a faculty goes into providing our graduate students with critical feedback about their efforts to become scholars and researchers and how little into criticizing their efforts to become good teachers. By "criticism" I mean the kind of feedback that seems to be appropriate to learning any practical activity, feedback that comments on how well one's means are suited to one's ends--what faculty do when they write on a seminar paper, "if you want to prove this, you'll need more evidences or a different kind of argument." Unless we can find ways of providing this critical feedback about teaching, we're unlikely to achieve one of our main goals: to have the training of future college teachers recognized as part of the department's intellectual work. We're unlikely to do so because for English Departments, the terms "intellectual" and "critical" are virtually synonyms.

Right now in my department we seem to have no tradition of commenting critically on pedagogy. That means that the same student who expects criticism in a seminar--who may seek out criticism while preparing a paper--doesn't expect it as a TA. In fact, he or she may regard such criticism as out of bounds, dismissing it as an intrusion on his or her personal "style" in the classroom. Having no such tradition also means that the faculty has no familiar register in which to express it--as they do when responding to the seminar paper. Looking over my department this year, I've seen TA's upset by criticism to a degree that puzzles the faculty, and I've also seen faculty struggling to find a way to formulate this feedback--a struggle that the TA's may not understand.

Precedents in the English Department

Are there any useful precedents in English Departments for this kind of criticism? My experience as a beginning teachers suggests one: teaching in close collaboration with colleagues, using largely the same materials and assignments, and meeting weekly, especially to discuss student writing. In that setting, criticism loses some of its sting because it comes in the context of an effort toward a common end and more important, because it's couched in the particulars of the materials at hand. Thus, being told that a writing assignment one has proposed won't work because it asks a question the text won't answer isn't taken as an attack on one's personal style, but rather as a judgment that the group can reason about. It's because this reasoning is possible that criticism of pedagogy is possible.

Mentoring

I've said our year has gone better than my emphasis would suggest, and one reason it has is that we began our mentoring by having TA's observe the faculty mentors' classes before the faculty observed the TA's. In several cases, the TA's have visited the mentors' classes again later in the semester, and the pairs have continued to exchange assignments and student papers they've commented on. In these cases, TA and faculty member are teaching in a parallel way, as it were, and, while this may not be quite as good a situation for our purposes as involving them in the very same course, it has allowed these persons to reason in common and

concretely about the decisions they make as teachers. From this may emerge a critical language adequate to reflecting on these decisions, and, if that happens, we'll have taken a significant step toward having pedagogy recognized as intellectual work.

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